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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Florida's Valencia Community College (VCC) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities project, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. The central aim of the college's action plan was to develop activity packets or modules that focused on a theme and which provided a structured sequence of learning activities organized around the theme. The theme embodied the following ideas: concrete activities designed to stimulate student thought, personal observation or reflection, collaborative activity, synthesis and application of learning, and assessment. The intent was to provide groundwork for the Summer Institutes on non-Western civilizations scheduled for 1997. After developing the draft action plan, the team decided to organize a college-wide public event that would highlight the Common Ground agenda. Obstacles faced by the college included delaying the first summer institute until 1998, experiencing difficulty integrating thematic topics into courses of various content, and facing limited faculty involvement. However, colleagues were enthusiastic and the diversity forums were a great success. It is critical to the continued success of the program that the work that has been done remain the focus of future projects and that the college remains committed to the original objectives. Responses by the faculty and students to the action plan as it has unfolded have been quite positive. (HAA)

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Valencia Community College
Exploring America's Communities Progress Report

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In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

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JC 970 125

Progress Report

AACC/NEH Common Ground Project

Team: **Daniel Dutkofski, Philip E. Bishop, Kevin Mulholland**

Mentor: **Daniel E. Rivas, Saddleback College**

Something about Valencia

Founded in 1967, Valencia Community College has served Orange and Osceola counties in Central Florida, providing programs leading to the AA degree, as well as over 40 different AS degrees. It is the fourth largest community college in Florida and over the past decade has been the fastest growing of Florida's five largest community colleges. To keep up with the growing demands of the area, 4 different campuses have been established and two centers maintained. Last year, the college had an actual enrollment of 47, 212: 36, 846 students for credit courses and 10,726 for Continuing Professional Education. The enrollment of the college is somewhat reflective of the demographics of the area, but certainly the area of greatest growth is in the area of minority students. At present, 67.8% of the college students identify themselves as Caucasian, 11.1% African-America, 13.6% Hispanic, and 5.2% Asian. This diversity brings a richness to campus life, a variety to the classroom situation, but also challenges the college to recognize and address this diversity.

Our Action Plan: Creating Conversations about Diversity

The central aim of our action plan was to develop activity packets or modules. The modules focused on a theme (duty/freedom, equality/hierarchy, etc.) and provided a structured sequence of learning activities

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organized around the theme:

1. *Concrete activity or stimulus:* A reading, video, debate, simulation, or other experience that will challenge and stimulate students to thought.

2. *Personal observation or reflection:* An opportunity for individual analysis, response, reflection.

3. *Collaborative activity:* Small-group discussion or other student-centered collaborative activity.

4. *Synthesis and application:* Opportunities for further research or application of learning (an essay, research project, or community involvement)

5. *Assessment:* Evaluation of topic activities, including the Common Ground questionnaire (to be submitted to project team).

The project's intent was to provide the pedagogical groundwork for the NEH Summer Institutes on non-Western civilizations that we expected to commence in summer 1997. The new content knowledge that faculty acquired in the summer institutes could be implemented in activities that helped students experience the diversity of cultures and opinions. After the March meeting and the draft action plan, the team decided to organize a college-wide, public event that would highlight the Common Ground agenda. These events were to be forums on a diversity-related issue, featuring panels of experts interacting with student/faculty audiences.

Obstacles and Outcomes

The delay of the first summer institute to 1998 meant that the diversity modules needed to stand alone, as promoting understanding and providing experience in diversity issues across the curriculum. In working with faculty to implement these modules, the Common Ground team found it difficult to import our thematic topics into courses of various content. It was necessary, rather, to develop a theme out of the course proper (for example, "Democracy and Individual Rights" for a government course, "Religious

Tolerance and Intolerance" for a medieval humanities course). We also found that implementing a structured, small-group discussion required fairly intensive mentoring; even veteran faculty did not always have experience in facilitating collaborative activities. The bonus in these impediments was that faculty discovered the power of such activities and are likely to employ these techniques more broadly and more often. One colleague testified that he was re-structuring his entire government course to provide more opportunity for student discussion and exchange. Because the work went much slower than we expected, the Common Ground team worked with fewer faculty in the fall semester than we had hoped. On the other hand, the enthusiasm of our colleagues and the rather stupendous successes of the implemented modules promise great things for the spring semester. One possible course for broader effect is to ask each humanities instructor to implement a diversity module once during the spring semester. We look also to encourage faculty in social science courses.

The diversity forums (organized around the hot election-year topic of affirmative action) were a rousing success, too. The expert panels included Valencia faculty and officials and representatives of area liberal-arts colleges and major corporations. Students responded vocally and passionately, in some cases carrying the discussion back to their classrooms. A spring forum is being planned on the topic of "the future of feminism," as part of Valencia's month-long celebration of women.

The Next Stage

The future of the Common Ground project here at Valencia is linked to two considerations. On the one hand, it is critical that the work that has already been done remain the focus of future projects. Too many important initiatives have floundered or, more significantly, have died a quiet, lonely death of inactivity because of fragmentation and overextension. People have lost sight of the original intention and have modified plans until they no longer had any resemblance to the original. To prevent this, we must stay

committed to the original objectives: establish a meaningful and productive forum for discussion of diversity and introduce information from different cultural perspectives. On the other hand, the project must continue to grow and adapt to the changing circumstances and conditions which the college addresses in its mission. The delay in the first scheduled summer institute simply means that a different forum for expanding the initiative across the campuses must be found. Although the process of mentoring faculty members has proven to be quite time-intensive, it still is vital to the success of the initiative and needs to be maintained.

The Tenor of Our Conversations

To date, the response to the action plan as it has unfolded has been quite positive. The students' response (which is, after all, the most important) has been marked by an enthusiastic recognition of the plan's basic assumption: if we establish an appropriate forum in which ideas can be shared openly and honestly, they will be. Students who have contributed to class discussions in the past continue to do so, but students who have been more quiet find themselves drawn into the dialogue. They do so because they feel the safety the questions provide to students holding diverse opinions. They also enter the discussion more readily because what is sought is their own ideas and opinions; there is no wrong answer, only their experience. This validation of their contribution helps them accept more responsibility for the class and relate the material to more than just a final grade and credit on a transcript.

The faculty response has also been interesting. Obviously, faculty members were recruited because they are known to be good instructors who have a history of innovation in the classroom. Their past success notwithstanding, they found that the modules enabled them to take their classes to the next level. The depth of the discussion improved and rather than becoming one more thing to do in the classroom, the modules in fact enhanced what the faculty members were already trying to do. By

encouraging more open dialogue on diverse issues in particular lessons, the faculty found the students better prepared for the "ordinary" material. Students tended to be more interdisciplinary in the classes because they knew that the connection they saw were important and had a place in the course.

Overall, the module activities and the forums have instigated a number of civil and reasoned conversations about the meaning of American experience and the role that diversity plays in it. It is just such conversations that the academy is supposed to promote. As our first summer institute approaches, we expect that such conversations on diversity will already be a part of the humanities curriculum. Most important, we feel, is that diversity be an active learning experience that engages students in passionate debate, not yet another dry and distant topic of only academic interest.